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The war is over and the victory won. Those of us who were obliged to remain at home must be satisfied to have done here all in our power to usher in a brighter and a better day; but money and material and self-denial are but poor sacrifices to lay on the altar of our country beside the lives of Liberty's heroic dead. One sublime sacrifice has made immortal their devotion. Upon them shall rest, forever, the gratitude and the benediction of a world redeemed.

FRANK I. DRAKE, *Superintendent.*

### THE POTTER-PRYOR DUEL

Ridicule is sometimes a better means of destroying an obsolescent and mischievous institution than argument. Cervantes dealt a death-blow to knight errantry when he related the wanderings of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. It fell to the lot of a Wisconsin congressman, in the last years before the Civil War, to deal a similar blow to the Southern "chivalry," and the code duello. The fire-eating antagonist of this farce (for so it proved to be) died in March in New York City, where he had passed a long and honored career of post bellum activity, as part of the state judiciary. He never relinquished his devotion to the "lost cause," nor failed to expound the philosophical right of secession, but it is not recorded that after his encounter with John Fox Potter, of the First Congressional District of Wisconsin, he ever again sought "the satisfaction due a gentleman" who considers his "honor" wounded. It all occurred in those last thrilling days before the Civil War, when Congress was itself a battle ground between North and South, sometimes not merely a battle of tongues and ideas, but the frequent scene of fisticuff and bludgeon encounters between the hostile parties. The occasion of one of these disgraceful mêlées was an antislavery speech made April 5, 1860, in the House of Representatives by Owen Lovejoy, brother of the abolition martyr of Illinois. Lovejoy's diatribe was perhaps the most direct and bitter attack upon slave-owners ever made in Congress, and the blood of the irascible Southerners was raised to the boiling point. Epithets like "black-hearted scoundrel" and "nigger-stealing thief" began to fly, and as Lovejoy in the passion of his denunciation advanced towards the Democrats shaking his forefinger in their direction, Roger A. Pryor, a young representative

from Virginia, sprang to his feet, and ordered the speaker to desist. Thereupon Potter of Wisconsin sprang to the defense of the Republican orator and shouted that his party had listened quietly for eight weeks to the Southern speakers and "Now, sir, this side shall be heard, let the consequences be what they may." Pryor and his comrades thereupon fell upon Lovejoy, whom Potter defended with such hearty blows that a Quaker friend told him he must have taken lessons in pugilism.

When the scuffle had quieted, and the fires of anger had burned low, the congressmen were somewhat ashamed of their vehemence, and Pryor attempted to have some of the remarks erased from the *Congressional Record*, especially those of Potter. Potter accused him in open house of tampering with the journal to his disadvantage. Pryor retorted with a threat of action whose results "the future will demonstrate," to which Potter is said to have replied, "Let it demonstrate." The next day Pryor sent a challenge to Potter, well knowing that the constitution of Wisconsin deprived any participant in a duel of his franchise and his office. He expected to be able to taunt his Northern antagonist with cowardice or to drive him from Congress. Potter, who despised dueling as a method of settling grievances, determined to teach the fiery Southerner a lesson, and turn the tables upon him. Assuming his right as the challenged party to choose the weapons for the encounter, he instructed his second, a Democratic congressman from Massachusetts, to accept Pryor's challenge, and to prescribe a fight with bowie knives at a distance of four feet either in a closed room or in the open air. Pryor's second at once remonstrated against "this vulgar, barbarous, and inhuman mode of settling difficulties," but Potter remained firm in his choice of weapons, and the duel never occurred. The entire country saw the joke, and the press rang with Potter's praise. During his absence from the house, one wag responded to Potter's name at rollcall that "he had gone to meet a Pryor engagement." "The argument of Mr. Pryor's friends against the weapons chosen by Mr. Potter may be regarded," said another punster, "as a fine specimen of reasoning a-Pryor-i." A Wisconsin editor declared that "Pryor of Virginia doesn't care to know how his Clay would feel in the hands of our Potter." In vain the Southern friends of Pryor explained and expostulated; they

were met with ridicule on every hand. "It is not because he is afraid that Mr. Pryor objects to bowie knives—oh, no! it's because they are so demnition vulgar." Virginia chivalry had been "put into a cold bath" was said more forcibly than elegantly.

At the North Potter was the hero of the hour. Congress received him with suppressed enthusiasm upon his return after temporary arrest by the authorities of the District of Columbia. His visit to Wisconsin during a congressional recess in May was a triumphal progress. He was a large, strong man of good proportions, a product of frontier life in Maine and Wisconsin. At Chicago he was given an enthusiastic reception; when he reached his home at East Troy in Walworth County the entire community filled its largest building in his honor. Even from the Southwest admirers sent him trophies; one from the congressmen of Missouri was a bowie knife over six and a half feet long, on the blade of which was engraved, "Will always meet a Pryor engagement." He acquired the soubriquet of "Bowie Knife" Potter, and early in the war a knife captured from one of the Louisiana "Tigers" was presented to him with a suitable inscription on its haft; likewise a short Southern sword picked up at the battle of Bull Run.

Mr. Potter kept his seat in Congress until 1863, warmly supporting the Union cause. His antagonist, Pryor, became a congressman in the Confederacy and later a brigadier general under Lee. After the Northerner's term of office was ended, President Lincoln appointed him consul general at Montreal. In 1866 he retired from public office, and passed the remainder of his life, until his death in 1899, on his beautiful estate on Potter's Lake in Walworth County—land that he himself in 1838 had bought from the government, when a young lawyer of scarce twenty-one he had determined to make his home in Wisconsin. There he was yearly visited by a group of friends from Milwaukee, members like himself of the "Loyal Legion," who called themselves the Phantom Club. To these friends Mr. Potter loved to exhibit his trophies—the knife he was carrying when challenged by Pryor, the one he bought after that challenge, and those presented to him by admiring friends. With the exception of the large Missouri "toothpick" all the bowie knives were given after his death to the historical museum of our Society, where they may

now be seen, emblems of a barbaric custom now obsolete in America, and reminders of the Wisconsin pioneer who drowned it with a deluge of ridicule.

### THE SINKING OF THE *ALBEMARLE*

A story has recently been told before the Lebanon County (Pa.) Historical Society<sup>1</sup> which calls to mind an historic exploit performed by one of Wisconsin's bravest men. It was October 27, 1864, the high tide of the Civil War. For six months Grant had been hammering Lee's army of northern Virginia, and for the same period of time Sherman in the West had been assaulting Joe Johnston's army in Georgia. The crucial election of the war was at hand and all over America men held their breath, fearing—or hoping as the case might be—that Lincoln would be defeated and therewith the war for the preservation of the Union ended ingloriously. A vital link in the serpentine chain with which the Union government was slowly squeezing the life out of the Confederacy was the thousand-mile blockade of the southern coast line. If this were broken, permitting the Confederacy access to the outside world, the Union cause would inevitably fail.

For a little time it seemed the Confederacy possessed an instrument adequate to break the blockade. A few miles up the Roanoke River lay the ironclad ram *Albemarle*, built in the style of the famous *Merrimac* which had been sunk two years before in the duel with the *Monitor* which revolutionized the art of naval warfare. Before the prowess of the *Albemarle* the wooden ships of the blockading Federal fleet were as helpless as children contending with a powerful man. In April, 1864, the ram attacked and captured the town of Plymouth near the head of Albemarle Sound, having beaten off the entire Union fleet and sunk one of its best vessels. A month later she again challenged and defeated single-handed a fleet of seven wooden vessels, sinking one of them that vainly essayed to ram her beneath the water line. Some means must be found to stay her career, if the Federal blockade was to be maintained.

The man and the measure adequate to the emergency were at hand. A Wisconsin youth of twenty-two, Lieut. William B. Cushing

<sup>1</sup> "Some Reminiscences of Noted Men and Times," read before the Lebanon County Historical Society, Feb. 21, 1918, by Capt. H. M. M. Richards.